

# ‘Music by Max Steiner’ Review: Play It Again, Max

MUSIC BY MAX STEINER

By Steven C. Smith

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*Reviewed by*

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Steiner, as music director of RKO Pictures, conducting his score for ‘King Kong’ (1933).

PHOTO: L. TOM PERRY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, HAROLD B. LEE LIBRARY, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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Steiner wrote the music for ‘King Kong,’ ‘Casablanca,’ ‘Gone With the Wind’ and dozens of other films.

Hollywood's golden age calls to mind all sorts of outsize figures: glamorous stars, martinet directors, brilliant screenwriters—and, perhaps less-known but no less essential, the composers who wrote the music that established its world dominance. Among the most notable of these composers was Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who was the subject of an illuminating biography in 1997: Brendan Carroll's "The Last Prodigy." Now we have a work to match it, giving us a portrait of another great composer, really the founding father of American film music, Max Steiner (1888-1971). "Music by Max Steiner," by Steven C. Smith, a journalist and producer of movie-themed documentaries, describes a long and tumultuous life and firmly establishes Steiner as not only a major force in Hollywood but also one of the most influential composers in the history of symphonic music.

Steiner and Korngold, as it happens, have many similarities. They were both raised in Vienna. They were both Wunderkinder trained in traditional composition and conversant from an early age with the Austro-German musical tradition. They both came from Jewish families that had departed from any traditional religiosity. (As Korngold's widow wrote, "We considered ourselves Viennese—Hitler made us Jewish.") They both had a soft spot for operetta. At one point, they even had offices in the same building at Warner Bros., along with the German-American composer Franz Waxman. The very idea that these émigré composers shared a workplace in Burbank, Calif., is worthy of a moment of awe. They form the core—along with Miklós Rózsa, Dimitri Tiomkin and Alfred Newman—of the golden-age elite, creators of the "Hollywood sound." These men—refugees of wars and racism—transplanted European music to America, and, with the help of a global amplifier—the movies—made the music both American and universal.

Steiner grew up in a family that owned Vienna's theaters. It was Steiner's grandfather who persuaded Johann Strauss Jr. ("Die Fledermaus") to write for the stage and Steiner's father who created Venice in Vienna, an immense amusement park with lagoons, a Ferris Wheel, music halls and restaurants—and music everywhere. Unlike Korngold, whose father—the redoubtable music critic Julius—hated his son's love for operetta, Max was encouraged by his parents. Because of the fame of the Steiner family, the boy's life was a heady mix of classical music (he attended the premiere of "Uncle Richard" Strauss's

“Salome” in 1905 at the composer’s invitation) and show business. At 19, he composed his first operetta (“Die Schöne Griechen”), which was produced in 1907.

Steiner was in London when the Great War broke out in 1914—he had gone there because of the popularity of Viennese music and a short-lived love affair with a British singer. As an enemy alien, he would have been interned had it not been for the Duke of Westminster, who facilitated a passport to a country not at war: the United States. At 26, the composer began a new life in New York City and would never return to Vienna.

Mr. Smith’s deft tracing of Steiner’s life in Vienna, London and New York, not to mention in his move to Los Angeles in 1929, helps us understand the varied experiences that went into his cultural formation. We learn that in New York Steiner mixed with the likes of George Gershwin and Jerome Kern and roomed with Metropolitan Opera baritone Emanuel Liszt. He was naturally charming and hopeful, though often irresponsible when it came to money.

Steiner, an immediate success as an arranger and conductor of Broadway musicals, was invited to Hollywood when the studios converted into movie-musical factories. There he earned a reputation as a composer who could arrange in any style from operetta to jazz. He hit his stride at RKO Pictures, which quickly promoted him to music director. Within three years, he would make history by composing a fully underscored dramatic talking film—“Symphony of Six Million”—something that had never been done before.

As Steiner’s career blossoms, Mr. Smith gives us a picture of a delightful and kindly man-child, living in Beverly Hills on Benzedrine, coffee and cigars, scribbling obscenities in the margins of his scores to entertain the boys who were orchestrating them. He was obsessed with music at the cost of his personal relationships, including those with his wife and their tragic only child, whose life ended in suicide. All of this, Mr. Smith occasionally reminds us, played out as World War II was tearing apart Steiner’s homeland.

Throughout the pre-Hollywood years and well after, Steiner kept alive his connection to the European musical tradition, attending concerts and socializing with fellow composers

and conductors, but, unlike them, working only in the movies. His film scores—once studio chief David O. Selznick supported the idea of fully scored dramas in 1932—are imbued with Steiner’s classical-music erudition. He employed, for instance, Richard Wagner’s leitmotif method for long-form dramatic storytelling—with characters and images given recurrent themes and sequences. But Steiner’s music is only vaguely Wagnerian in sound—mostly when it swirls in constant upward modulations. What makes his voice so striking has far more to do with his ability to construct themes that are effective and memorable. Nothing could be simpler than the theme for “King Kong” (1933) heard at the top of the film. Only Steiner could invent something that, using only three descending notes, expresses immense power and dread when played by the lower brass but can then be transformed through orchestration and a change in harmony to make Kong a sympathetic hero, one worthy of our pity. Steiner makes us root for the monster at the end. That is genius.

The reader will know some of the films that Mr. Smith discusses and can access others through streaming services. If you don’t know the 1932 “Bird of Paradise,” go to YouTube and watch it. If you want to accompany your reading of the chapter on Steiner’s score for “Casablanca” (1942), put it on whatever screen you wish, or listen to a recording without the film, and you will hear the fecundity of Steiner’s talent. Great film music can be appreciated with your eyes wide shut, just as ballet scores like “The Rite of Spring” can be detached from the synchronicity of visual gesture.

Listen to a Steiner score and you will hear resonances of other composers, including not only Wagner but Richard Strauss and, not least, Gustav Mahler. Indeed, Steiner prepared the way for our acceptance of the symphonies of Mahler in the 1960s, when the millions who grew up on Steiner’s scores—with their marches, their passionate love themes, their disruptive jumbles of naiveté and sophistication—discovered them in the concert hall. (Steiner first heard Mahler’s symphonies when the composer rehearsed them in Vienna a half-century before.) Just listen to Libby’s theme in “They Died With Their Boots On” (1941) and you will hear a melody worthy of Mahler himself. And of course, take any of Steiner’s themes of happiness, duty and love—say, from “Gone With the Wind”—and you will hear Viennese operetta.

Steiner was frequently required to use pre-existing popular songs in his scores, mostly against his will. His deft treatment of “As Time Goes By” in “Casablanca” is perhaps the most famous example. And, like Brahms, Puccini and Weill, he was a master of musical references. Think only of the hat tip he gives to the Walt Disney Co.’s theme song—“When You Wish Upon a Star”—in his score to Disney’s “Those Calloways” (1965).

It is no easy task to write about music, and, given that Steiner wrote so much of it—over 300 film scores—any biographer faces the challenge of making his descriptions comprehensible. I winced at times, as when Mr. Smith explains a chromatic descent (“Imagine that you are climbing a tall ladder. . . . To descend . . . you place one foot on the step below”), but musically trained readers should give him a pass on this.

Of course, the music itself is only part of the story. Mr. Smith’s chronicle is filled with incident and sometimes jaw-dropping detail. At the Atlanta premiere of “Gone With the Wind” (1939), the movie’s Caucasian stars (Hattie McDaniel wasn’t invited) and the book’s author, Margaret Mitchell, were serenaded by an African-American chorus that included the 10-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. dressed as a slave.

Steiner’s music for “Gone With the Wind”—its soaring main theme has become a sonic emblem of Hollywood’s glory years—is a reminder of the heights that “mere” film scores can reach. Our ignorance and snobbery—Mr. Smith describes the New York Philharmonic’s principal cellist leaving his instrument in its case for a single rehearsal of Steiner’s music—have given Steiner and the other composers in that Burbank building a reduced status they simply don’t deserve. We need to hear more of their music. We owe it to them and to ourselves.

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